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## The next big thing -- and how to fund it

Posted: November 9, 2010

Created: 09/11/2010 - 12:29

Gina Kolata had an interesting piece in today's New York Times about the difficulty of predicting where the next big biomedical breakthrough will come. She, like many people, had predicted big things for gene therapy. She was wrong.

She writes:

“ But was I right to say advances are unpredictable? Yes and no, scientists say.

“ "I've learned over the years that the best predictor for what will be new and exciting is, 'Expect the unexpected,' " said Dr. Joseph L. Goldstein, a Nobel laureate who is professor and chairman of the department of medical genetics at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center in Dallas.

“ Dr. David Baltimore of CalTech, another Nobel laureate, said, "If you could predict it, it wouldn't be a breakthrough."

She goes on to quote Dr. Richard Klausner, a former head of the National Cancer Institute, who says Moore's Law, which refers to the exponential increase in computer processing speed, also applies to biomedical research.

“ When that happens, Dr. Klausner said, "barriers and unknowns seem to be falling," and it is pretty much predictable that even more exciting discoveries will be made.

He thinks that's where discoveries relating to stem cell fate are today. In fact, yesterday we wrote about yet another discovery in that area.

CIRM's Basic Biology Awards are our answer to the problem of trying to fund the next big thing. (Here are recipients of the Basic Biology I and Basic Biology II awards.) The goal is to fund researchers looking into basic questions of how stem cells function, with the idea that the answers might lead to insights that generate new uses for stem cells. Those insights might be in the area of transplantation, but could also reveal new ways of developing drugs or understanding disease or controlling stem cell fate.

Or, the breakthroughs might be in an area that doesn't yet have a name. Who knows?

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Tags: Basic Biology

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